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THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT JANUARY 23 1981

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A Scribbler comes of age

By Lorna Sage

JEROME J. MCGANN (Editor):
Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works
Volume 1
464pp. Clarendon Press: Oxford
University Press. £35.
0 19 811890 2

This first volume of the new Oxford English Texts Complete Poetical Works of Byron raises an old question: just how did the fat boy from Harrow turn himself into a poet? The flab is, of course, even more in evidence this time round, with thirty-five previously uncollected bits and pieces helping to swell the volume; and the daunting scale of the textual apparatus (the last "thorough scholarly edition" was done almost eighty years ago, as Jerome J. McGann points out) makes Byron's dreadful juvenilia look all the more dim. To begin at the beginning is to wonder at its being a beginning at all.

Thro' thy battlements, Newstead, the hollow winds whistle; Thou, the hall of my fathers, art gone to decay; the hemlock and thistle Have chook'd up the rose, which late bloom'd in the way.

"On Leaving Newstead Abbey", the poem that opened his first publicly printed volume *Hours of Idleness* (1807), was proudly dated by Byron "1803" (when he was fifteen). He obviously felt this should impress readers the right way at the outset, but the silly jaunty and the arrogant parade of "ancestors" (including at least a couple of whom, as the commentary notes, "there is no record") have quite a contrary effect—even if you don't know that Newstead was rented at the time to Lord Grey de Ruthin (who seems to have made a humiliating pass at him), and that he was painfully at odds with his fat, passionate and vulgar mother (who, he suspected, fancied Lord Grey), and awfully conscious of the slakness of his station.

The second poem, on leaving Harrow (1805), took the same unpromising line: Ye scenes of my childhood, whose lov'd recollection, Embitters the present, compar'd With the past; thy scenes, thy powers of reflection, And friendships were form'd, too romantic to last.

His title and his youth (*Hours of Idleness* "published the author as 'George Gordon, Lord Byron, a Minor'") moved him to an ecstasy of self-caressing sadness and self-admiration, and his facility in verse seems to have completed the damage. He saw himself as brilliantly boyish, and said as much in his Preface: the poems are "the fruits of the lighter hours of a young man, who has lately completed his nineteenth year"; he will, he says, content himself "with the not very magnificent prospect, of ranking amongst the meagre gentlemen who write", my reader must determine, whether I dare say "with ease". His snobbish squirming, and his wincing tenderness for his work, elicited a corresponding scyphography from the first reviewer, "an ample evidence, as the *Critical Review*, "of a correct taste, a warm imagination, and a feeling heart". However, the *Edinburgh Reviewer* (Brougham) did a splendid if slightly belated job on the whole production, especially on the subject of the Preface: He possibly means to say, "See how a minor can write! This poem was actually composed by a young man of eighteen, and this by one of only sixteen!" So far from flinching, with any degree of surprise, that very poem was written by a youth from his leaving school to his leaving college... we really believe this to be the most common of occurrences; that it happens in the life of nine men in ten who are educated in England; and that the tenth man writes better verse than Lord Byron.

Brougham possibly fixed on the word "common" with a particular relish. He was out to undo Byron's sense of his own specialness, and to suggest how very vulgar "the noble minor" was in his insistence on it.

He was absolutely right at the time (though English Bards and Scotch Reviewers in 1809, also in this volume, was to prove him wrong): the main interest of Byron's earliest writings is willing out, with hindsight, any sign of something that was not "common". Brougham, of course, had not seen the even earlier, privately printed things—the libertine poem that set his mother's circle in a flutter ("Now by my soul, 'tis mine, delight! To view each other panting, dying, in love's extatic posture, lying..."; or the "tender" lyrics to his boy loves. But they

would hardly have changed his mind. "To E. —" (an all-purpose love poem, according to Professor McGann, who coolly consigns it to both an anonymous tenant's son of 1802 and to Edleston, Byron's Cambridge choirboy of 1805) sets the tone: And though unequal is thy fate Since title deck't my higher birth; Yet envy not this gaudy state Thine is the pride of modest worth.

"Fugitive" early Byron is perhaps even more smug than diletante Byron. Edleston moved him to lines that should at least be camp, but aren't ("he who seeks the flowers of truth, must quit the garden for the field"); and his gallant "gather ye rosebuds" verses to girls betray him into farcical revelations: 'Tis this, my belo'v'd, which spreads gloom o'er my features, Tho' I ne'er shall presume to Which God has grac'd, as the fate of his creatures, In the death, which one day will deprive you of me.

You of me? By some dreadful vengeance (the god of rhyme perhaps) his poetical machine seems for once to have said what he really meant. The poem "To My Son" (not printed until after his death, addressed according to Professor McGann to an otherwise unrecorded bastard of 1807) suggests even more unavailing possibilities: Oh, 'twill be sweet in thee to Ere age has wrinkled o'er my face; Ere half my glass of life is run, At once a brother and a son...

This sounds to me like Humbert Humbert dreaming of engendering a line of Lolitas, though it may be what Wilson Knight meant when talking of Byron and Christian virtue—kindness to children and pets. Things were going on that didn't get into the poems. He was filled with revulsion—against his mother, against his impoverished inheritance, and against himself. In April 1807 he wrote to his lawyer John Hanson from his mother's rented home: You speak of the *Charmes* of Southall, the place I abhor, the Fact is I remain here because I can appear no where else, being completely dished up. Wine & Women have dished your humble

Servant, not a *Sou* to be had, all over, condemned to exist, (I cannot say live) at this *Crate* of Dullness, till my *Lease of Infancy* expires... you will be surprised to hear I am grown very thin, however it is the Fact... I have lost 18lb in my weight...

Though Brougham's review came as a shock, he had in a sense prepared for it. He was plotting his escape from minority (despite the wine and women beast) and from England, and coincidentally, getting into shape for Grub Street. He began "The British Bards" in October, feeling pleased with himself, and completed *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* almost a year later in September 1808, smarting furiously (Brougham had intervened) but, poetically speaking, a new man.

I, too, can scrawl, and once upon a time I poured along the town a flood of rhyme...

His slimming methods were drastic ("I wear seven Waistcoats; & a Great Coat, run & play at Cricket") and so were his operations on his style: he turned meanly on the writers he had lovingly pastiched, on Scott's "half-strung harps", on Moore's "melodious... lust", on Bowles as "the oracle of tender souls". You can almost see the iard melting away.

He was pared down to genuine nausea and self-contradiction. *English Bards* is, textually, the most complicated case in the volume, in part because of Byron's chronic indecision about who and what to abuse, and how much. He maintained the aristocratic stance over the matter of accepting cash for your work—"No! When the sons of a Misanthrope descend, their bays are scar'd, their former laurels fade"—but otherwise he acknowledged that he was in the business. And given that, universal spleen followed almost automatically: I printed—older children do the same. 'Tis pleasant, sure, to see one's name in print: A Book's a Book; altho' there's nothing in't. Not that a title's sounding charm can save Or scrawl or scribbler from an equal grave: This LAMB must own, since his Patrician name Failed to preserve the spurious Farce from shame.

Professor McGann, in an uncharacteristically opinionated note of his own, suggests that Byron "really had no intense satiric quarrel with his age", which seems right when you consider how many of his objects of attack were later proven into his life. Monk Lewis, for example, who gets some memorable lines: All hail, M.P. I from whose infernal brain Thin sheeted phantoms glide, a grisly train. Even Satan's self with thee might dread to dwell, And in thy skull discern a deeper hell.

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scintillated burr-munch-up is really like at close quarters, is easy enough to dismiss Eliot's as the spiritual D.N.T.s, but the tendency to the quick laugh and the quick stick to the dangerous temptation for the song-writer and "performing" poet, falsehoods which he has taken far away from reality. When, in a poem from the 1976 collection, *Judy Garland and the Cold War*, Simmons' wish my lovely lucid songs/had

Occasionally plainness of speech can lapse into dullness, the language slithering into a mixture of dead metaphors, as when, at the end of "Five American Sonnets" "my host breezed in/just as our diving full, we saw the

By their truth to experience, the best poems in *Constantly Singing* avoid these dangers, registering with detached precision the cheerless pretences of an unhappy marriage.

He kisses children convincingly, passes plates, eats his tea, answers questions, sits smoking, devoutly watches TV.

Who doubts he can keep this up forever, or till the audience walks out.

—or the freshness and disorient-

the love poems "bearing thin"; and soft-porn cliché: "our glowing bellies, leaving/in ecstasy" on. At other times, as if to hint that he is aware of broader perspectives, *Stimmons* can be over-allusive, and *Constantly Singing* is studded with phrases from the Master: Shakespeare, Donne, Crashaw, Wordsworth, Browning, Whitman and, of course, Yeats—most of which add very little, while some are absurdly inappropriate, as when, in "Balled of a Marriage", a husband enquires

tion at divorce :
when alimony splits the salary
you're poor again, like a student
of forty-five, staring out
of your rented terrace house
at the great pebble-dashed wall
of the Presbyterian Hall—
always in shadow . . .

The poet, however, is still "the
star" and persistence irony never
quite succeeds in neutralising
note of self-congratulation. "Meditations
in Time of Divorce", the opening
poem-sequence of the book, is
often starkly moving—"I will never
go back/They will not come to
me . . ."—but a tendency to auto-
biography keeps breaking in :
Behold the change-shaper,

"This sweet mysterious country
explored by my right hand.
Am I the first, my wife, that's burst
into this silent land ?"
—the Coleridge echo seeming
merely a distracting, embarrassed
mannerism. Yet, typically, "Ballad
of a Marriage" recovers almost im-
mediately. The husband's response
to the power he feared is precisely
and painfully delineated:
P'd elo't with girls myself, but I
was trembling, loathing, hating
these men, and her, and yet I found
her stories titillating :
first fascination, then disgust :
first pain and then a surge of lust.
And self-judgement is delivered un-

In the interst

Despite the calculated absurdity, and the self-judgment a few lines later—"Platitudinous old pseud"—one feels that at some level Simons means it, as he does when

inter. In the same sequence he describes himself as "in good faith embracing/necessity, constantly singing, not/putting a sour face on it," in "rather too obvious contrast

War Poems and Recollections from the Middle East 1940-1946 254pp. Shepherd-Walwyn, 27.50 (£3.50 paperback). 0 85683 047 X

surely the soldiers' duty. They included the simple ex-patriots who disliked the idea of murder but obeyed orders; one of the Catholic fellows intruded even into Magdalen College by James' request; a disreputable ex-actor; a rich but semi-literate brewer; and a former naval lieutenant with a few scraps of Latin and French. Brave men, all of them, and brave and cowards, honest men and knaves, Catholics and Anglicans; they had little to recommend them except a desire to restore King James and (in most cases) a considerable fondness for the bottle. Inevitably there were some who were not so ready to follow their fellows in return for pardon and a reward. The trials of those betrayed make up the final part of the book. They make an interesting contrast with the trials of the Popish Plot, in that the judges bled with little need for new ideas: the accused were almost certainly all guilty of treason.

As it turned out, far from bringing about James' restoration, the trial

Mrs Garrett's main sources are the depositions and evidence of the conspirators, which she has used carefully and skillfully. She tells a complicated story with clarity, enthusiasm and a lively understanding of character. Occasionally she is shaky on questions of background detail—the Association of 1696, for example, could not have included a promise to uphold the Act of Settlement; which was not passed until 1701—but her handling of the plot, the plotters and the milieu in which they lived is shrewd and

longer heads with the local authorities, the Jews and townspeople. The isolation of the army within the community was confirmed when James insisted that its members were no longer subject to common law.

If anything about the loyalty of the officer corps it was not James' public policy in itself, but the fact that it threatened their careers and placed their personal position in the wholesale purge of Protestant officers from the Irish army in 1688 and 1689, and more immediately by the random culling in 1687 without financial compensation, of a number of officers who refused to promise their support in a future parliament. They were quite per-

parade to keep the army out of politics; it was James's wish, and usually policy, who insisted on bringing politics into the army. After the birth of the Prince of Wales in 1688 there were strong rumours that a political test was to be imposed on all officers: could they read and expectorate Latin as well as handle a sword? Childs argues—and he is not alone in this—that the army could not do this, and would have resisted William's attempt to do so. Hence, he himself might have been commander-in-chief. Nevertheless, and by the King's himself.

The material on James's army is not abundant, but such as it is, Childs has examined it thoroughly amongst other things he has made a geographical study of the 1250 of its officers. He points out that the army was a mix of English, Irish and he will then have completed the first scholarly study of the regular army between the death of Cromwell and the rise of Marlborough.

On minor points his work will not be modified, but if the general picture is sketched as I think it might be, he is wrong. The first narrative on James II's army is that of an old soldier, James II's description of his army can no longer be dismissed as a symptom of a general decline in the quality of the army. Childs's analysis of the army in 1688 is based on a number of sources, but he is wrong in his use of them. He is wrong in his use of the sources, but he is wrong in his use of the sources.

lately. Whatever the motive might be for William, the plan to murder him in cold blood appeared more than odious. Although James clearly was not authorized or approved the plot and although all those convicted exonerated him from any knowledge of the crime, the propagandists naturally claimed that he had instigated it. The discovery of the plot sparked off massive and unexpected expressions of popular affection for the hitherto far from popular king. A year later the peace of Amiens removed any threat of French peril for the British. By the time that the French Revolution appeared, in 1792, England had a Queen Anne a monarch who for many English, a Stuart and far more popular than "But William" had ever been. The failure of the massing of the "But William" at the beginning of the end of English Jacobitism. Thanks are due to Mr. Garrett for giving us such a personal and readable account of it.

Building

ones, in the conduct of Britain's foreign policy. During the eighteenth

giant aristocracy, its domestic position increasingly secure and its self-confidence fed by success, was firmly in the saddle. To men of stamp the hopes or grievances of merchants, or the sufferings of workmen, were of secondary importance.

the fact that even the most ardent supporters of the policy have been reduced to a state of apathy. Jones says considerable attention to the commercial background to British policy has clearly shown that it was not, as the official policy-makers would claim, a policy designed to help Britain's foreign policies but limited by the instruments available for their conduct. It also brought out:

The short analytical discussion covering the entire period, of power and military resources in

well done. (Though the present discussion of diplomacy is more than sufficient in particular to enlighten about the considerations though unplanned, improvement of British diplomatic organization which took place during the nineteenth century.) On a number of strategic issues there are examples illustrating the difficulty of convincing British seaforces to treat at time of war, the concise treatment here will be very useful to students for whom the book is the main intended.

It is impossible to quarrel with the author's concentration on the 1690s onwards, on France, Prussia and the House of Austria, providing which all the

foreign policy revolved, therefore, around the oil and stone by which almost all else was judged. But there are gaps and uncertainties in the picture of the past in the earlier parts of the book. The October crisis of 1971 is twice referred to in passing (once in the introduction) but never discussed in detail. It should have been planned, I thought, to have been given a separate page for a comparison with the oil crisis, a situation which brought Britain within striking distance of Russia and forced her, though with a long delay, to the aid of the Arab states in the wake of the attacks which were to be the beginning of the age of Palmire. The book also touches on the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict and Disraeli. Again, although the book is concerned with Anglo-American relations, the book is completely concerned with the United States, and the role of all is said and done in the United States. The book is followed by a discussion of the role of the United States in the world, and a chapter on the role of the United States in the world, and a chapter on the role of the United States in the world.

Its clearly balanced and carefully edited approach to the material included in this book to a wide range of students is to be hoped, more than anything, a reflection of the author's student readability. It is a pity, however, that Professor Jones has not been better served by his publishers. Several hundred of the graphical windows and the small appearance of a group of pages with unjustified right-hand margins are less than we are entitled to expect from a firm of the stature of Collins.

"Experience" and what the much-scientificated bur-room punch-up is really like at close quarters. I is easy enough to dismiss Eliot's vision of the spiritual DT's, but the tendency of the quick-steps-response and the quick-steps-response to a dangerous temptation for the song-writer and "performing" person betray him into conventional formulae which are at least a far away from reality. When, in a poem from the 1927 collection, *Garland and the Cold*, Eliot's poems admits "I wish my lovely lucid songs/had the conviction of John's/get from just knowing that I wanted", one senses all the problems of wanting to be wanted of depending on a sudden change of mood to be wooed in ways that will cost the poet, eventually, all that he has.

By their truth to experience, the best poems in *Constantly Singing* avoid these dangers, registering with detached precision the cheerless pretences of an unhappy marriage.

He kisses children convincingly, passes plates, eats his food.

answers questions, sits smoking, devoutly watches TV.

Who doubts he can keep this up forever, or till the audience walks out.

—or the freshness and disorientation of divorce when almost any splits the salary you're poor again, like a student at forty-five, staring out of your rented terrace house at the grey pebble-dashed wall of the grey pebble-dashed Hall.

Always in shadow.

The poet, however, is still "the star" and persistent irony never quite succeeds in neutralizing a note of self-congratulation. "Meditations on Divorce," the opening poem—surely the book is often starkly moving—"I will never go back/They will not come to me . . . but a tendency to autobiography keeps breaking in: Behind the change-shaper, now Ulysses, now Ulysses, lighter of a fire, with screwed up newspaper.

Despite the calculated absurdity, and the far-judgment a few lines later—"Platitudinous old pseud" means that at some level Simmonson means it, he does mean it, in the same sense as the translator in the same speech describes himself as "in good faith embracing himself" constantly singing, not putting a sour face on it, "in rather too obvious contrast to the wife, who is busy" carrying the "rock-beautiful, the sea/the kids, the kids, the kids, this might be defensible, but it is probably because, like the whole poem, "Meditations in Time of Divorce" carries: a strong impression of

At times the poems admit of ambiguity, but they are not pompous. "After Edna," perhaps the best poem in the book, shows the poet making a furtive visit to the former marital home—"after midnight, in the dark, perhaps to look for old tapes,"—and presents it with equal clarity and innocence: the sensation of punching the wife out of his nose. When he hits her, "the scorching tapes / with drink and sleep / are torn away. Again they are shining / intimate touch—her nose, his / cheekbones, sure!"—and "his / last glimpse of her / is a faded, / a scented cliff / nightwear, humble, / like a dark harvest etching. The / woman, lit by a drink and sleep, / winking, / of gleaming, rape on a / plastic spoon."

[illegible]

flinchingly: "Freedom and truth by which I swear, in fact were more than I could bear."

The personal, autobiographical tone of *Constantly Singing* also gives it its one poem about the political situation in Ulster, "Coleline: 1971," which describes the psychological impact of a bombing—not a murderous outrage but rather an event that seems, in its context, an almost trivial affair of noise and broken glass. Simmons's account is excellent merely as documentar-

description, is muted and self-critical, sensing the inadequacy of his own responses and the shallowness of the liberal aestheticism which seems to be the only present alternative to barbarism. The poet and his friends are "middle-class megalomaniacs" who "no star/in the heavens of our chests", who "all have a certain flair/for enjoying each other/in a mildly bohemian fashion". When the explosion is heard, other postures appear: first the stilted indignation, then "the furtive, prurient curiosity," "quick, cautious, wry side into the night," like the rest of Coleraine. The poem's most powerful statement is a confession of helplessness:

You might define decadence
by our ambivalence, unable to see
or hear.

exactly what's going on, only the old words and music, our eyes curiously impaired. Shops, churches, uniforms look as they used to, but don't fill the role that the bare policemen with wit and integrity is a poignant figure like the clergyman who embodies faith, or the rigorous teacher.

One can scarcely avoid comparing this bleak acceptance of his hesitancy of thought and rhythm with the forceful, almost visceral reactions of Heaney: his instinctive revulsion, for example, at the sight of British armoured cars and his grimly sympathetic understanding of

Prices of war

Bullen. The contributors were teachers, civil servants, soldiers, all

Three young servicemen: Denis Saunders, Victor Selwyn, and David Burk, launched the idea of *Oasis: The Middle East Anthology of Poetry from the Forces*, and with the official blessing of the Commander in Chief and help from the Salamander Society it was published in September 1943, some months

the final battles of the Tunisian campaign. *Return to Oasis* reprints the original volume, adds a preface by other publishers of the Middle East series, and also includes a section comprising unpublished soldiers' poems and ballads collected over the past four years by the Salamander-Oasis Trust. Vignettes, biographies, notes, a chronology and maps augment this material, and there is a new preface by Victor Selwyn, a lively account of Cairo's literary life by Durrell and two prefatory notes by Jan Fricke and Kate G. S. Fraser. Arriving thirty-five years after the ending of the war this handsome anthology has a bold, if not unexpected air.

As Fletcher explains, the book is primarily a document and a memorial—it preserves a unique moment in history and provides a record of a unique community. As such, it is of undeniable worth. But, predictably perhaps, an essential conservatism and a lack of sophistication characterize much of the writing—finely tuned sonnets, memories of Georgian-vistas rising

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No room has been found for references to the bibliographical indications provided in Miss Patricia Craddock's edition of *English Essays*, and Sir Geoffrey Gornall's introduction necessarily omits editions of Gibbon's autographs and letters that are of standard importance. Nevertheless, the editor's attempt at establishing authority by the compilation of a bibliography is commendable, and it is regretably pleasing to find that the same collection of Gibbon's, or his famous collector's, had provided many of the sources for the great work.

the first edition of Sir Geoffrey Keynes's *Gibbon's Library* was published in 1940, and most of the stock was lost in an air raid soon afterwards. This valuable listing of the recorded contents of Gibbon's library at various times in his life was, however, being reprinted by Sir Geoffrey's own working party, which contains his handwritten notes recording some changes in locations (although it has proved impracticable to alter them fully). The most important addition to the new Appendix, having over

's tools

sixty titles from a previously unedited catalogue in the Pierpont Morgan Library. These additions include Payne Knight's *Remains of the Works of Pliny* (1786) previously owned by the Society of Dilettanti, as well as many other classical and general titles which fill out our knowledge of these tools of my historical manufacturer as they are referred to his working library.

No room has been found for reference to the bibliographic indications provided in Miss Patricia Craddock's edition of the *English Brevary*, and Sir Geoffrey Elton's introduction necessarily omits editions of Gibbon's autobiography and letters that are no longer standard. Nevertheless, the volume remains authoritative as an elegant introduction to the composition of the *English Brevary* and the sources of its material. The annotated edition of Elton's *Constitutional Documents* that provided many of the sources for the great work.